DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 709 FL 014 565

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TITLE Developmental Patterns of Reading Proficiency in Adult ESL Students: Implications for ESL Classrooms.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 21p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Toronto, Ontario, March 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; Developmental Stages; *English (Second Language); Longitudinal Studies; *Miscue Analysis; Oral Language; Reading Processes; *Reading Skills; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Story Reading; Story Telling

ABSTRACT

A study of the developmental patterns of reading proficiency of seven adult second language learners over a four-month period to determine the changes in their oral reading behavior and in their comprehension of written English is reported. The study looked specifically at oral reading and retelling. All subjects were beginning to low-intermediate level students of English as a second language (ESL) from a variety of language backgrounds. The stories selected were difficult enough for the readers to produce some miscues. Subjects read the stories orally, with no assistance from the teacher, and then retold them. The taped readings and retellings were then analyzed to determine proficiency levels and developmental patterns. Two specific hypotheses were addressed: (1) that ESL students would have some difficulty with the English inflectional system, and (2) that beginning ESL readers would make many miscues in oral reading but would decrease in miscues and increase the syntactic and semantic acceptablity of their reading. The first hypothesis was not borne out, since the forms used were classified as dialect miscues and not inflectional errors. The second hypothesis was borne out. Four conclusions are: (1) literacy acquisition in a second language is like that in a first language; (2) teachers must be aware of students' reading modes; (3) ESL students do not need to be totally proficient in English to become literate in it; and (4) when poor readers rely too much on graphic and syntactic information, their attention must be refocused. (MSE)

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DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS OF READING PROFICIENCY IN ADULT ESL STUDENTS:

Implications for ESL Classrooms*

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*This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the TESOL Conference, Toronto, Canada, March 1983. I wish to thank my research colleague, Dr. Joanne Devine, Skidmore College, for her comments and advice on the paper.

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Since the 1971 publication of Y. Goodman's seminal work, Longitudinal Study of Children's Oral Reading Behavior, miscue analysis has been used in numerous studies of developmental reading patterns in native speakers. As an analytic tool, miscue analysis looks at the types of oral reading errors, or miscues, that readers make and the changes these patterns undergo as readers develop proficiency in reading. The patterns that emerge from miscue analysis, along with retelling scores as measures of comprehension, provide data on readers' use of language and meaning cues, i.e. the degree to which readers use grapho-phonic, syntactic, and semantic information in processing text.

Despite the longstanding interest in the developmental trends in the reading of native children, to date, no investigations, with the exception of Devine (1981), have focused specifically on the patterns of acquisition for non-native students learning to read in a second language. A number of studies (Rigg 1977, Clarke 1980, Connor 1981) using miscue analysis have provided important insight into ESL students' oral reading patterns. Devine's study (1980) has provided further information on developmental trends in ESL reading. Grouping Spanish-speaking ESL students according to proficiency levels in English, Devine first compared the reading patterns of the groups and then compared the developmental patterns of these ESL speakers to those of native children (Goodman 1971). She found that, as they become more proficient, that is, better able to construct meaning from a text, ESL students, like native speakers, demonstrate changes in their oral reading behavior. Specifically, both groups' increased reading proficiency resulted in a decrease in the frequency of oral miscues, an

increase in the use of syntactic and semantic cues from the text; a decrease in the reliance on graphic cues; and frequent corrections overall, and for the highest proficiency readers, more selective corrections.

The Present Study

This paper reports on a longitudinal pilot study of the developmental patterns of reading proficiency for adult second language learners, following them over a four-month period, to determine what changes, if any, occur in their oral reading behavior and in their comprehension of written English as they gain proficiency in reading. Our research looked at the oral reading and retelling of seven ESL adults from various language backgrounds. All were beginning/low intermediate students (level 2 in a program with four proficiency levels), according to the University of Michigan Placement Test, in a community-based ESL program. Two of the students had had five or six years of English study in their native countries, while the rest had been studying English only in the United States and only an average of 15 months. Using the procedure for miscue analysis recommended by Goodman and Burke (1972), we audiotaped readers approximately four months apart. Prior to each taping session, students were told that they were to read the story orally, with no help from the researcher, and after the reading they would be asked to retell the story. The stories were selected to be difficult enough for readers to produce some miscues. After the reading and retelling we analyzed the readers' miscues and their retellings to determine their levels of proficiency in reading and their patterns of development.

One of our hypotheses was that ESL students would have some difficulty with the English inflectional system. Like Rigg (1977), in her study of ESL students' reading, we did find that readers often substituted the null form for an inflectional suffix: want for wanted, work for worked, job for jobs. Furthermore, they often substituted the base form of the verb for the irregular past tense: come for came, run for ran. Some readers similarly read woman for women. Because these types of miscues are predictable and occur regularly, we consider them to be ESL dialect miscues (Rigg 1977) and do not include them in our data.

A second hypothesis was that beginning ESL readers would make many miscues in their oral reading of the first story, but that as they increased their reading proficiency, we would find both a decrease in the quantity of miscues and an increase in their quality in terms of their syntactic and semantic acceptability. In most cases we found this to be true. Most readers did make fewer miscues on the second story (Table 1), although the range was broad; one reader had no change in miscues per hundred words (MPHW), making 3.2 MPHW in both stories, while another reader had a decrease from 13.0 MPHW to 8.4.

(TABLE 1)

In each case, as miscues decreased in frequency, there was an accompanying increase in syntactic acceptability, ranging from an increase of three percentage points for reader 7, to 31 percentage points for reader 2 (Table 2). In four of the seven cases, there was also an increase in semantic acceptability: for reader 1 from 33 to 45 percent, for reader 3 from 50 to 53 percent, for reader 4 from 28 to 37 percent, and for reader 5 from 27 to 33 percent. Of the three readers for whom there was a

(TABLE 2)

TABLE 1

Miscues Per Hundred Words (MPHW)

Readers	Story 1	Story 2
1	3.2	3.2
2	3.2	1.4
3	3.9	1.9
4	4.3	3.4
5	5.3	3.0
6	10.7	9.8
7	13.0	8.4

TABLE 2

Percentages of Miscues Syntactically and Semantically Acceptable

Type of Acceptability	Story 1	Story 2
Reader 1		
Syntactic	66	74
Semantic	33	45
Reader 2		
Syntactic	44	75
Semantic	33	17
Reader 3		
Syntactic	59	68
Semantic	50	53
Reader 4		
Syntactic	50	63
Semantic	28	37
Reader 5		
Syntactic	50	59
Semantic	27	33
Reader 6		
Syntactic	54	58
Semantic	45	43
Reader 7		
Syntactic	54	57
Semantic	34	27

decrease in semantic acceptability, readers 7 and 2 had the most substantial drop: from 34 to 27 percent, and from 33 to 17 percent, respectively. Both stories for both readers had fairly low percentages of semantically acceptable miscues. An interesting fact is that reader 7 had the highest number of MPHW in the first story and second highest in the second story, but reader 2 had the lowest number of MPHW in both. At the same time, both readers had very low retelling scores on both stories. It appears from these data that, although an increase in reading proficiency is accompanied, for the most part, by a decrease in quantity of miscues, quantity in and of itself is not an accurate gauge of reading proficiency.

For example, one rather surprising result was that in a few instances readers did not make as many miscues as we had expected on the first story. We wondered, if the story was too easy and if our readers were more proficient than we had assumed. But when we analyzed the retellings we discovered that some of the apparently fluent oral readers, readers 1 and 2, for example, with the fewest number of miscues, had almost no comprehension of the story. The same phenomenon occurred four months later with the second story: few miscues, little comprehension.

For purposes of illustration I would like to consider two readers in particular. Leona (reader 1), a Chinese student, is typical of the group just mentioned; she had relatively few miscues in either story (3.2 MPHW in each), and little comprehension of either story. Marina (reader 3), on the other hand, a Spanish student, had excellent retelling scores on both stories and yet had more MPHW (3.9) than Leona in the first story, but fewer in the second (1.9).

We also found a dramatic difference in Leona's and Marina's use of nonword substitution miscues (Table 3), for example, reading certainly

as centurly, and agree as ajee, substitutions that are clearly not just phonological dialect variations. 40 percent of Leona's miscues in the

(TABLE 3)

first story were nonword substitutions compared to 9 percent of Marina's, and 30 percent in the second compared to Marina's 6 percent. Such miscues are often indications of heavy reliance on graphic information to the exclusion of syntactic and/or semantic information in the text, a point further supported by the degree of graphic similarity of all their substitutions. Leona's substitution miscues, in general, showed a high percentage of graphic similarity, compared to Marina's (Table 4): 92 and 85 percent of Leona's miscues had a high degree of graphic similarity,

(TABLE 4)

while Marina's percentages were 50 on each of the stories. At the same time, Marina had higher percentages of semantically acceptable miscues on both stories than Leona (Table 2, readers 3 and 1, respectively). More proficient readers like Marina, it appears, are not tied so exclusively to the grapho-phonic system. When readers do focus on graphic cues in the text, they tend to ignore the syntactic and semantic information available. A careful "sounding out" of words can give the appearance of comprehension. Leona, for example, carefully and correctly pronounced the words circus, advertisements, and dangerous, all key concepts in the first story, but she was obviously unaware of their meaning when retelling the story.

Differences in how the two readers process print are also evident in the syntactic and semantic acceptability of their miscues (Table 5).

(TABLE 5)

TABLE 3

Percentage of Nonword Substitutions

Reader	Story 1	Story 2
Leona	40	30
Marina	9	6

TABLE 4

Degree of Graphic Similarity Stated in Percentages

Story	High	Some	Low	None
Leona				
Story 1	92	4	4	0
Story 2	85	11	4	0
Marina				
Story 1	50	46	4	0
Story 2	50	35	8	7

TABLE 5

Percentage of Miscues Syntactically and Semantically Acceptable

Type of Acceptability	Story 1	Story 2
Leona		
Syntactic	66	74
Semantic	33	45
Marina		
Syntactic	59	68
Semantic	50	53

Both readers used the syntactic system fairly well, although Leona, with the poorest retellings, had a higher percentage of syntactically acceptable miscues than Marina: 66 and 74 percent for Leona, 59 and 68 percent for Marina. In contrast, Marina had higher percentages of semantically acceptable miscues: 50 and 53 percent for Marina, 33 and 45 percent for Leona. The difference in their use of the semantic cueing system is even more dramatic when we compute the semantic acceptability score by ignoring minor syntactic constraints (omission of a determiner, substitution of this for these, etc.), a procedure used by Clarke (1980) in his study of L_1 and L_2 readers as a way of overcoming the limitations of traditional coding for ESL students. Traditionally the coding of semantic acceptability must be no higher than syntactic acceptability on the assumption that to a high degree meaning is dependent on syntax (Goodman and Burke, 1972), a procedure that is somewhat unsatisfactory for ESL students operating without full control of the syntax of a second language. When we ignore these minor syntactic constraints in our analysis, Leona's semantic acceptability scores increase from 33 to 44 (story 1) and from 45 to 60 (story 2), while Marina's increases are even greater, from 50 to 75 (story 1) and from 53 to 74 (story 2). The differences between the two readers' scores are 31 percentage points on the first story and 14 on the second. (Table 6).

(TABLE 6)

It appears that Leona, in addition to relying heavily on graphic cues, also relies more heavily than Marina does, on syntactic cues, while Marina, on the other hand, uses semantic cues more extensively than Leona.

TABLE 6

Percentage of Semantically Acceptable Miscues
Ignoring Minor Syntactic Constraints

Reader	Story 1	Story 2
Leona	44	60
Marina	75	74

Discussion of Results

While it is difficult to generalize beyond the limited data of the present study, other researchers (Cziko 1980, Clarke 1980, Hudson 1982) substantiate the claim that good and poor L_2 readers use different reading strategies. Cziko (1980:113) says that the strategies L_2 readers use are related to their level of competence in the language: "Readers with less competence appear to be less sensitive to contextual information and consequently use a more bottom-up strategy of relying primarily on graphic information."

Clarke's study (1980) of the differences in ESL readers' performance in their native and second languages suggests that possessing a limited command of the language tends to limit readers' use of psycholinguistic strategies. According to Clarke, good readers rely more heavily on semantic cues when reading in their native language than do poor readers, who rely more on syntactic cues, but the good readers do not appear to transfer that skill completely when reading in a second language: "Limited language proficiency appears to exert a powerful effect on the behaviors utilized by the readers" (Clarke 1980:206). Although Clarke found that their use of semantic information decreased in L_2 reading, Marina, in my own study, clearly demonstrates that some of the advantage remains; her use of the semantic system is strong. Though her command of English is limited, she exhibits a strong reliance on semantic information in the text. Certainly the role of semantic cues in second language reading warrants further investigation.

Other factors as well may be influencing the choices readers make in their use of cues while processing text. ESL readers, like native speakers, clearly operate with a set of assumptions and principles about what is

important in reading. Devine (1983) discovered that ESL students have theoretical orientations to reading that appear to affect performance in terms both of the kinds of cues readers focus on and in their comprehension of the text. We are discovering that readers like Leona appear to be operating with a restricted view of reading that suggests that the process is primarily sound- and word-centered, with little focus on meaning. Leona's reading interview, conducted at the beginning of the first session, supports this hypothesis. When asked to identify someone who was a good reader and explain why, she said her husband was a good reader because "his pronunciation is good." And immediately following the reading of the first story, when asked to do the retelling, she said, "I think it will be very difficult for me. I can't understand very well. I just read the sounds." Such an orientation may reflect readers' own educational experiences as children learning to read their native language, or it may reflect their coming to a writing system like English that is morpho-phonemic from a system like Chinese, as in Leona's case, that is largely ideographic. It is possible, too, that such an orientation may be reinforced by their current instruction in English. In some ESL classes, for instance, it is clear that heavy emphasis in reading is placed on accurate pronunciation and word identification and far less on meaning and comprehension. Whatever the complex of reasons, it is evident that some ESL students do not have a comprehension-based orientation to processing text. Marina, however, did express the need to understand what she was reading, "to understand the idea," she said in the interview, an orientation to reading manifested in her excellent retellings of the stories.

Predictability of text may also be a factor that influences the kinds of cues readers focus on. Rhodes (1979) demonstrates that young children in their native language will change their focus to a degree when syntactic and semantic predictability are greater. Predictable texts tend to encourage miscues of higher quality in terms of their syntactic and semantic acceptability. The same may be true for ESL speakers as well. Because Leona had such difficulty with the first two texts we had her read, we asked her, in addition, to read and retell a third story about a woman who rejects traditional roles and becomes a pilot. We felt that the meaning of the story was more accessible and more conceptually predictable than the earlier stories, and we were confident that Leona would respond positively, and with some interest, to the content of the story. The results were interesting: her retelling was much better than those of the first two stories, she corrected more syntactically and semantically unacceptable miscues, and her substitution miscues were more meaning-related and included fewer instances of nonwords. For example, her mispronunciations of fortunately and female were both corrected as she apparently began to make sense out of the context in which these words were used; and in the sentence "The plane propeller had been broken during the last landing," she substituted problem for propeller, not entirely accurate, but nevertheless more semantically related to the story in terms of the actual events that occurred than were many of her miscues in the first two stories. Leona's substitutions appear to be based more on the underlying meaning she was building than strictly on graphic similarity on which she so heavily relied in the earlier readings.

While she made higher quality miscues and had significantly better comprehension, she made a substantial increase in MPHW. Her earlier stories were each 3.2 MPHW, and on this story she made 5.2 MPHW. A sign of poor reading? On the contrary, we are beginning to speculate that some beginning ESL readers with few miscues, those who strongly rely on graphic information, may go through a stage in which their miscues will first increase in number as they take more risks and begin to use other available language and meaning cues. For Leona, at least, miscues of the type she made in this third story are signs of progress on the road to developing proficiency in reading.

Conclusions and Implications

First, it appears that acquisition of literacy in a second language is similar to acquisition in a first language. Increased reading proficiency for native and second-language speakers alike results in certain patterns of development: fairly frequent errors as readers learn to take risks based on a broad range of language cues, until more proficiency is reached, at which time a decrease in error frequency occurs along with an increase in syntactically and semantically acceptable structures.

Second, we need to be aware of ESL students' models of reading. Fluent oral reading does not necessarily mean that readers are comprehending. And instruction that heavily favors a view of reading as careful and accurate pronunciation and word identification will simply reinforce restrictive models of reading that some readers are already operating with. It is not surprising, then, that some students' reading places comprehension in a secondary role.

Third, ESL students do not need to be totally proficient in oral English to become literate in English. Proficiency in any of the four

aspects of language--listening, speaking, reading, writing--occurs from active participation in these activities, and the development of any one of these areas will enhance the development of the others. Deferring reading and writing will unnecessarily postpone them and will deprive students of the opportunity to further their understanding of the language through its written form.

And fourth, when poor readers rely too heavily on graphic and syntactic information, their attention needs to be refocused. Clarke (1980) says one of the behaviors to encourage is concentration on passage-level semantic cues, along with a deemphasis on grapho-phonic and syntactic exactness in favor of a tolerance for risk-taking. ESL programs need to encourage the creation of methods and materials that will enable readers to use the full extent of their knowledge to bridge the gap between what they already know and what is available in the text. When meaning becomes the central focus, the Leonas in our ESL classrooms will more likely begin changing their theoretical orientations to reading; they will begin to see reading more as a means of communicating than as merely an exercise in correct identification of words and phrases. Language experience activities that allow students to use their own personal syntactic and semantic knowledge, and culturally relevant and more predictable materials that allow students access to the syntactic and semantic structures of existing texts will encourage the view of reading as a process of communication. Leona can read, and will, if the materials allow her to do so and encourage her to read for meaning.

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